The unsettling of vision – tableaux vivants, early cinema, and optical illusions

Wiegand, Daniel

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OF DOMITOR

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Form and Material

Edited by Scott Curtis, Philippe Gauthier,
Tom Gunning, and Joshua Yumibe

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Daniel Wiegand

The emergence of film at the end of the nineteenth century enabled a visual experience that, for many observers, was characterized by a certain unsettledness, an ambiguity between the images' actual flatness and the impression of volume and depth they created. While this tension had certainly existed within earlier forms of image-making, the projection of luminous and moving photographic images defined it in a new and radical way, introducing what Antonia Lant has described as a "novel spatiality" into visual culture. As she puts it, film proved to be "an utterly flat medium of presentation, insubstantial, without texture or material, and yet evoking, in a wafer, a fuller illusion of the physicality and exactness of human beings than any prior art."[1]

While Lant relates this general quality of film images to the contemporary discourse on "haptical" perception, this chapter will focus on films that self-consciously presented optical illusions and highly ambiguous images—often images *within* the film image, such as paintings or posters—hovering between volume and flatness. As I will demonstrate, visual ambiguity in these films became an attraction in itself while triggering scenarios of visual deception. Furthermore, I will argue that many of these playful explorations of visual uncertainty explicitly referred to and made use of the stage practice of *tableaux vivants*. As will become apparent, these imitations of artworks by live actors were not only situated within the context of high art and classical aesthetics but also firmly embedded within popular culture and, more specifically, within a tradition of ambiguous images that chiefly strove to entertain.

Visual Experiments at Biograph

The Model, a film produced by the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company in 1897, shows an artist at work in his studio. The surviving three frames from the Biograph Photo Catalog (fig. 2.1) and the description from the Biograph Picture Catalog suggest that there is no further plot development.[2] The live model, clad

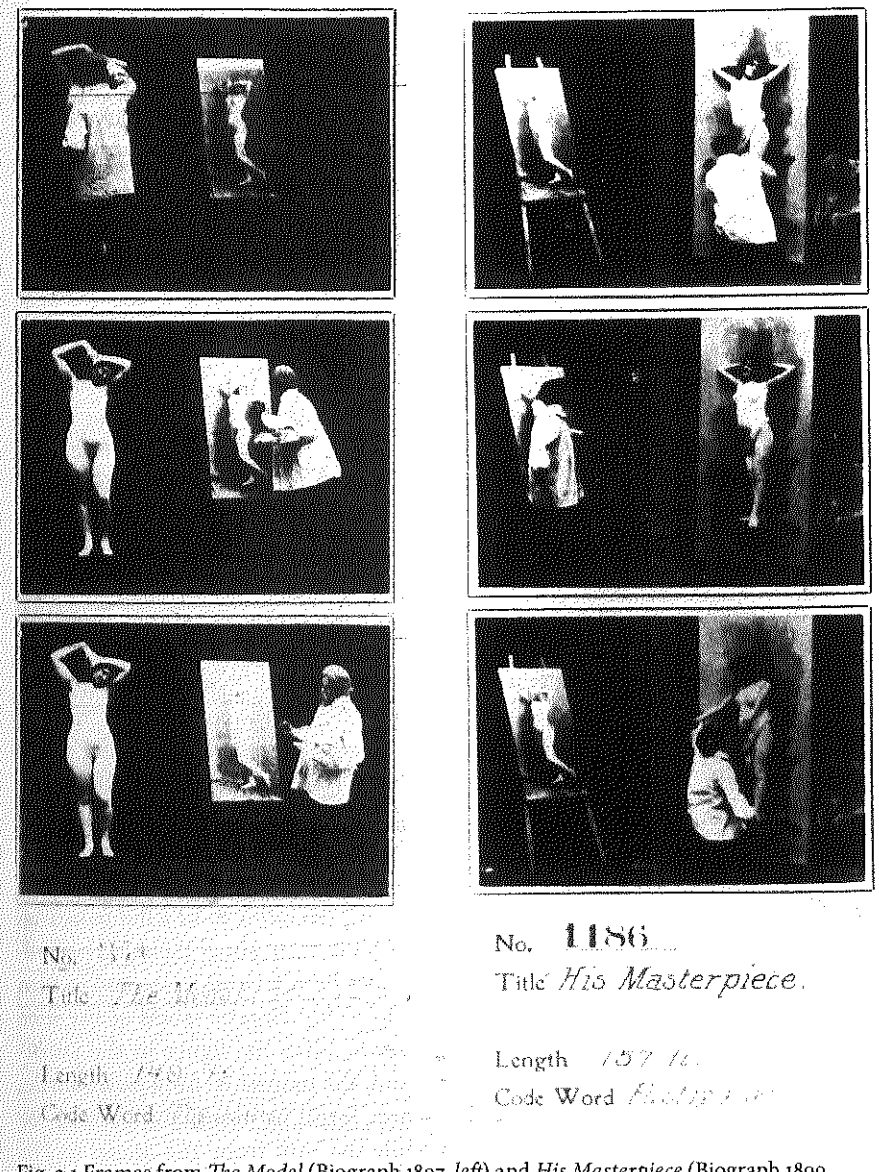

Fig. 2.1 Frames from *The Model* (Biograph 1897, *left*) and *His Masterpiece* (Biograph 1899, *right*) as printed in the Biograph Photo Catalog, Vol. 1, No. 1–499 (retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.7282/T3V988DP) and Vol. 3, No. 1002–1502 (retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.7282/T33T9HJ3).

in a white leotard signifying nudity, and the almost finished painting are set up next to each other, facing the camera frontally, thereby provoking spectators to let their eyes wander between the two. It is as if the "intellectually active processes of comparison and judgment" that Charles Musser attributes to early film spectators with regard to their prowess in intermedial culture,[3] were addressed here by one cinematic shot, provoking a mode of reception that art historian Victor I. Stoichita refers to as the "inquiring eye," a wandering gaze that eagerly absorbs the various "images within images" presented.[4] Even if *The Model* with its rather sparse mise-en-scène is a far cry from the painted cabinets of curiosity analyzed by Stoichita, it still encourages spectators to explore and enjoy the various similarities and differences between the two figures. It is remarkable in this respect that despite some obvious deviations (most noticeably the size), there is a strong alignment between the two, with the figure in the painting standing out in stark relief against the background in a way similar to the real figure while both of them are part of the same plane surface of the film image. The artist seems to serve as a stand-in for the film spectators and their "inquiring eyes," moving from one figure to the other, scrutinizing them from various distances, perhaps checking on how close the painting has come to the original.

It is revealing to compare this film to *His Masterpiece*, another Biograph production apparently shot two years later, which has a very similar setting and even uses the same small painting as a prop (fig. 2.1). Again the painting is positioned immediately next to a real posing model, and again it seems that the filmmakers deliberately made the two figures look alike, thereby creating slight ambiguities—the surviving film print even reveals painted shadows on the model's leotard. However, roles have been somewhat reversed. As opposed to the former film, the actress does not play a *real* model but the figure in another painting. It is as if the visual ambiguities only implicit in *The Model* had now been turned into a genuine optical illusion: a live actress only *pretending* to be a flat painting. Similar to some of the trick films by Georges Méliès from about the same period, the ambiguity inherent in the "false" painting, while still being presented to film spectators as a visual attraction, is transferred to the diegetic world of the film by becoming the nucleus of a rudimentary plot: when the figure in the painting begins to move and slightly turns her head, the painter is, for a short while, unsure whether or not he can trust his senses (until he eventually decides for the former and embraces the figure). So while the shift from *The Model* to *His Masterpiece* can certainly be understood in terms of early cinema's penchant for remakes, it goes beyond a mere variation of an established pattern. The differences rather affect the basic structure of the film and almost bring about a change in genre. Even if no cinematic tricks—like the stop trick for instance—are used, *His Masterpiece*'s emphasis on illusion, animation, and sudden transformation reveals its kinship with the trick film, emerging in just these years.

Tableaux Vivants: Illusion-as-Attraction

There are several links between films like *The Model* and *His Masterpiece* and the stage practice of tableaux vivants or "living pictures," as they were commonly referred to at the time.[5] The actresses in these films with their characteristic leotards, standing still and posing as (or for) a painting, could easily be identified by contemporary spectators as tableaux vivant models even without any explicit reference in the film title (which *was* given in other cases such as *A Living Picture Model Posing before a Mirror*, Biograph 1897). Tableaux vivants were imitations of paintings or sculptures staged by living but motionless models, originally shown privately in aristocratic and high-bourgeois drawing rooms but later increasingly exhibited in public venues such as variety theatres, vaudeville houses, and music halls around the world, culminating in the enormous popularity of tableaux vivants in the years around 1900.[6] Some of these acts, like those by German entrepreneur Henry de Vry, staged large paintings with up to thirty performers, making use of painted backdrops, stage machinery, and elaborate lighting effects. Smaller ensembles of three to four, like the *3 Olympier*, usually posed as groups of sculptures, sometimes combining tableaux vivants with acrobatic acts or dance. Single performers, mostly either beautiful women or strongmen—and often in the nude—were also very popular.[7] Within the context of bourgeois entertainment culture, tableaux vivants were frequently used to present the larger variety theatres, with their patrons from higher social strata, as places of art and refinement.[8] At the same time, however, they were astonishing attractions that addressed spectators' visual curiosity and adhered to the logic of the spectacle. With their display of nude bodies, performers capable of perfect physical standstill, and spectacular decor and lighting effects as well as the latest stage machinery, tableaux vivants around 1900 were not some odd leftover from nineteenth-century drawing room culture but an up-to-date stage attraction, firmly embedded within the international culture of display.

Part of tableaux vivants' attraction lay in their astonishing resemblance to real artworks and in their potential to play on visual perception. Advertisements and reports in the variety theater trade press frequently claimed that audiences were temporarily enticed to believe they were looking at real artworks rather than living beings. One advertisement for the famous tableaux vivants trio The Seldoms maintained that "you don't think you see living people but masterpieces created by the greatest sculptors."[9] The illusory effect seems to have been even more spectacular when trained animals like dogs and horses were involved, as is indicated by an advertisement claiming that "the horse Loky is standing in a pose of such complete standstill that every spectator must be in doubt if he sees a living horse or one carved from stone."[10] As with other media of illusion, anecdotes of deception were spread in the trade press, often making fun of gullible and less-educated

spectators, as in a report on a show of tableaux vivants on a British music hall stage, "Two Germans were standing next to me.... One of them (he looked a bit dumb) just couldn't believe that the 'marble sculptures' were not made of marble. It took some time for his friend to convince him that they were really girls."[11]

These anecdotes did not only involve the lower educated but also those who were considered to be the authorities in the field of aesthetics. As one advertisement claimed, even famous sculptor Reinhold Begas "didn't believe that these were living people until they moved,"[12] and fellow artist Wilhelm Krumm was quoted affirming that "if he didn't *know* that they were real, even an artist could be deceived thanks to the lighting effects and watching from some distance."[13]

It may of course be doubted if many spectators were truly deceived by the posing figures, but as these sources indicate, tableaux vivants were at least *presented* and *advertised* as shows of optical illusions. This was surely done to underline the artistic value of the shows ("so artistic that you even take them for *real* sculptures"), but the comments in the trade press also reveal what Tom Gunning calls the "the entertaining pleasure of uncertainty and ambiguity," a typically modern pleasure based on the very knowledge that one's senses are fooled.[14] While tableaux vivants can therefore certainly be linked to other turn-of-the-century shows of illusions (such as stage magic), they produced their own specific temporality. Spectators were probably not so much left in doubt if what they saw was possible as they were supposed to *switch* between one way of seeing ("image") and another ("living people"), either as a sudden revelation that they had been deceived (indicated by some of the sources), as a skeptical gaze weighing the options, or as some kind of a *playful dialog* with the tableaux vivants, consciously switching back and forth between the two ways of seeing.

In that sense, the temporal structure inherent in the perception of tableaux vivants bears a certain resemblance to conceptions of so-called *aesthetic* illusion as discussed in art theory at the time by theoreticians like Konrad Lange in Germany. Lange in his book *Das Wesen der Kunst [The Nature of Art]* construes illusion as the basic mental process involved in the perception of artworks, describing it as a "pendular movement," a continuous "transposition going on in the consciousness of the viewer, when the perceived material object [e.g., a painting] is exchanged with its content."[15] Lange, a professor of aesthetics at the University of Tübingen (and later a fervent opponent of the notion of film as art) had practical experience with staging tableaux vivants, citing them as prime examples of so-called inverted illusion: while paintings are flat and give the impression of three-dimensionality, tableaux vivants, on the contrary, are formed by groups of solid bodies but are supposed to give the impression of a plane surface.[16] To optimize this effect, various strategies had indeed been developed throughout the nineteenth century: the arrangement of the actors in a large picture frame; the arrangement of the audience in a delimited area to avoid extreme angles that would destroy the illusion; specific kinds of lighting; and sometimes even a veil hung before the stage, reducing the figures' appearance of three-dimensionality.[17]

Despite the fact that tableaux vivants could be cited to illustrate concepts in academic art theory, the discourse surrounding their presentation in amusement venues such as vaudeville theatres seems in many cases far removed from conceptions of aesthetic illusion as fostered by Lange and others. Whereas these theorists strove to construct an autonomous perceiving subject capable of aesthetic judgment, the cited sources from the trade press rather reveal an enjoyment in the *unsettling* of vision and even in the possibility of genuine deception. In that respect, tableaux vivants should rather be situated within a tradition of ambiguous images from the realm of popular culture, such as the numerous picture puzzles, multistable images, and hidden images, which abound in illustrated magazines at the end of the nineteenth century. One example would be the famous "duck-rabbit" from 1892, which can be seen as either a duck or a rabbit (but never as both simultaneously) and which was later cited by Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein to elucidate his concept of *Aspektwechsel*, the sudden and surprising switch from one way of seeing to another, accompanied by a "cry of recognition", "A rabbit! etc."[18]

Tableaux Vivants in Film

Wittgenstein's "cry of recognition" marks the illusion in ambiguous images like the duck-rabbit or tableaux vivants as the seed of surprise and enjoyment in sudden revelations. Early cinema continued this tradition in genres such as the trick film, the *féerie*, and the comedy, and it did so in many cases by incorporating staging practices of tableaux vivants from the variety theatre. For instance, each shot in the Gaumont dance film *Porcelaines tendres* (Emile Cohl, 1909) shows a completely static tableau vivant in which the actors pose as porcelain figurines for at least ten seconds before they eventually start to dance. The film's advertisement in *Moving Picture World* puts emphasis on this aspect of illusion-as-attraction, "A Gaumont in which mysticism is developed. A number of pieces of beautiful Sèvres porcelain are shown in series, and in each instance the pieces of ware are in reality composed of living people. When the pieces disintegrate into the original models who pose in various dances and drills the surprise of the audience is marked."[19]

While *Porcelaines tendres* exhibits living bodies posing as three-dimensional figures, many early films played with the double nature of the tableau vivant oscillating between flatness and volume. French trick films and *féeries* by Georges Méliès (e.g., *Le portrait mystérieux*, 1899; *La Fée Carabosse*, 1903), Gaston Velle (e.g., *La valise de Barnum*, 1904; *La garde fantôme*, 1905) and Segundo de Chomón

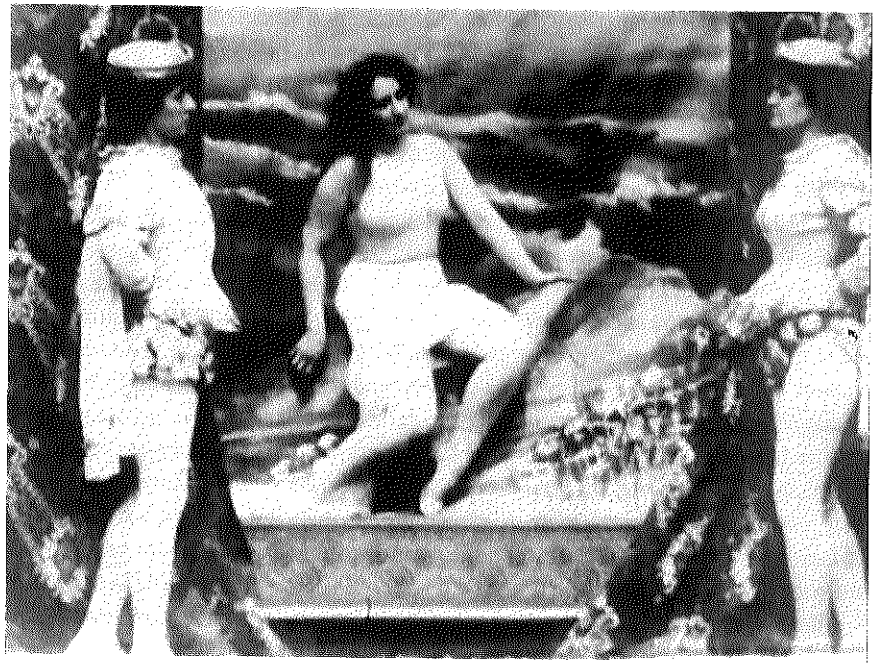

Fig. 2.2 The first tableau vivant from *Living Pictures*. "By the sea" and "The Tempest" (Biograph, 1900), later rereleased and copyrighted in the compilation *Living Pictures* (1903). Courtesy Library of Congress.

(e.g., *Hallucination musicale*, 1906) show various examples of convincingly ambiguous images for which it is indeed difficult to say (at least for some time) whether they are posed by live actors or if they are only flat images. As we saw before, the Biograph Company, being in constant exchange with New York's vaudeville houses, used tableaux vivants from early on to create visual ambiguities. In fact, the company produced and distributed whole a series of "living picture" films between 1900 and 1903, showing similarly clothed models posing as famous paintings in a picture frame (fig. 2.2). In these films, the models do not move at all (the only moving element are two pages, opening and closing the curtain), making it in some cases almost impossible to tell whether they are real or not.

In all these films, the illusion-as-attraction clearly solicits the film spectators, with the ambiguous images being frontally arranged toward the camera in direct address, but in some cases, they also involve diegetic characters. In *Kiss Me* (Biograph, 1904), we see a fake billboard with several posters advertising burlesque shows. One of the figures is a real woman standing in a space cut out from the wall (fig. 2.3).[20] The dark background, of the same color as her dress, is reminiscent of certain *trompe-l'œil* paintings—usually derided or ignored by official

Fig. 2.3 *Kiss me* (Biograph 1904). Courtesy Library of Congress.

art theory around 1900—which often utilized dark backgrounds to underline the effect of the figure reaching out of or even leaving the picture frame, such as in the famous *Escaping Criticism* (1874) by Pere Borrell del Caso. While this never happens in *Kiss Me*, the dark background still gives relief to the figure and suggests the possibility of a three-dimensional, living body. Even more so, the poster toys with the idea of a ripped-off surface, which is mirrored in the jagged outlines on the adjacent poster on the left. As the film proceeds, an old man and his wife enter the frame, with the husband obviously getting interested in the female figure as she pouts her lips and beckons him over, just until the old lady prevents him from taking further steps. It is impossible to recount what is actually happening here: is the old man hallucinating? Is the poster really coming alive? Is it really a person standing in a nook, trying to irritate passers-by? Attempts to pin down the film on any of these explanations seem futile because it is apparently less aimed at telling a coherent story than at exhibiting an ambiguous image-as-attraction and channeling this ambiguity towards a diegetic character, who accordingly becomes the butt of the joke.

The scenarios of deception enacted in these films—their playful, unruly, and often ironic tone, and last but not least their toying with erotic and voyeuristic concerns—set them apart from debates surrounding notions of aesthetic illusion in art theory, illuminating that they were rather indebted to a tradition of popular images in which the sudden discovery that visual objects may be different from what they seem and that one's own senses (and those of others) are fallible became a source of pleasure, amusement, and laughter. In ways similar to tableaux vivants and other forms of multistable images, these films addressed a scrutinizing, maybe even suspicious gaze that enjoyed exploring visual paradoxes and shifts in perception. It is important to notice, however, that in doing so, early films did not only harken back to already existing forms of optical illusion but tested out their own capacity to create images lingering in uncertainty—who knows, maybe the flirting model will not only leave the billboard but the cinema screen as well.

Daniel Wiegand is a postdoctoral researcher at Stockholm University. He is author of *Gebannte Bewegung: Tableaux vivants und früher Film in der Kultur der Moderne*, and editor with Jörg Schweinitz of *Film Bild Kunst: Visuelle Ästhetik im vorklassischen Stummfilm*.

Notes

1. Antonia Lant, "Haptical Cinema," *October* 74 (Fall 1995), 45.
2. *Biograph Photo Catalog* Vol. 1, (1898–1905); *Biograph Picture Catalog* (1902), 14.
3. Charles Musser, "A Cornucopia of Images," in *Moving Pictures: American Art and Early Film 1880–1910*, ed. Nancy Mowll Mathews and Charles Musser (Manchester/Vermont: Hudson Hills, 2005), 160. See also Musser, "A Cinema of Contemplation, A Cinema of Discernment: Spectatorship, Intertextuality and Attractions in the 1890s," *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 159–179.
4. Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight Into Early Modern Meta-Painting* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 146.
5. For a discussion of the relationship between tableaux vivants, early cinema, and the motif of the animated painting or sculpture, see chapter 2 in Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c. 1900* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), 45–104. For the general use of tableaux vivants and living sculptures in early cinema see Vito Adriaensens and Steven Jacobs, "The Sculptor's Dream: Tableaux Vivants and Living Statues in the Films of Méliès and Saturn," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 13, no. 1 (2015): 41–65; and Daniel Wiegand, *Gebannte Bewegung: Tableaux vivants und früher Film in der Kultur der Moderne* (Marburg: Schüren, 2016).
6. My research in the German variety theatre trade press has revealed over one hundred international acts active between 1890 and 1914.

7. The imitation of sculptures was sometimes referred to as *poses plastiques* as opposed to tableaux vivants, the imitation of paintings.
8. See Daniel Wiegand, "Früher Film, Tableaux vivants und die 'Attraktion des Schönen': Archäologie eines diskursiven, bildgestalterischen und rezeptionsästhetischen Phänomens," *Film Bild Kunst: Visuelle Ästhetik im vorklassischen Stummfilm*, ed. Jörg Schweinitz, Daniel Wiegand (Marburg: Schüren, 2015).
9. Advertisement, *Das Programm* 109 (1904).
10. Quoted from Joseph Garncarz, *Maßlose Unterhaltung: Zur Etablierung des Films in Deutschland 1896–1914* (Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 2010), 25.
11. "Londoner Brief: The Living Pictures," *Der Artist* 481 (1894).
12. Quoted from: Wolfgang Jansen, *Das Varieté: Am Beispiel der Berliner Entwicklung* (PhD thesis: Freie Universität Berlin, 1989), 358.
13. "Aus dem Künstlerleben," *Der Artist* 1025 (1904).
14. Tom Gunning, "Phantasmagoria and the Manufacturing of Illusion and Wonder: Towards a Cultural Optics of the Cinematic Apparatus," *The Cinema, a New Technology for the 20th Century*, ed. André Gaudreault, Catherine Russell and Pierre Véronneau (Lausanne: Éditions Payot, 2004), 40. See also Gunning's "An aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," *Viewing Positions, Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers, 1995), 114–133, especially 116–119.
15. Konrad Lange, *Das Wesen der Kunst: Grundzüge einer illusionistischen Kunstlehre*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: G. Grote, 1907), 74, 257.
16. Ibid., 507.
17. See Birgit Jooss, *Lebende Bilder: Körperliche Nachahmungen von Kunstwerken in der Goethezeit* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1999), 164–172.
18. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (Chichester/Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 208e; and Wittgenstein, *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume 1, Preliminary Studies for Part 2 of Philosophical Investigations*, ed. Georg Henrik von Wright and Heikki Nyman, (Chicago/Oxford: Chicago University Press/Blackwell, 1982), 63e.
19. *Moving Picture World* 5, no. 11 (1909): 347.
20. The name Rose Sydell written underneath the poster refers to a famous burlesque star known, among other things, for her tableaux vivants. Biograph had already explored the idea of the living poster in three films from 1899: *The Poster Girls*, *The Poster Girls and the Hypnotist*, and *A Midnight Fantasy*. In these films, the models pose in front of poster backgrounds instead of standing in a nook.